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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NDJAMENA 000599

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SUBJECT: CHAD: DAS YAMAMOTO MEETING WITH FRENCH AMBASSADOR

REF: NDJAMENA 586

Classified By: P/E HAYWOOD RANKIN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In meeting with French Ambassador Bercot April 25, DAS Yamamoto explained that he had urged President Deby to delay the May 3 election and begin a dialogue with the opposition. Bercot regretted this approach. He put little store in political dialogue. He preferred to ask Deby to announce before May 3 the appointment of an opposition government. Bercot was also cool to the Ambassador's suggestion that the only way to sell such an idea to the opposition would be to promise new presidential elections in a year, if May 3 went forward. With French elections coming up in 2007, Bercot pointed out, there was not much time left in which France could be depended on to retain an interest in the subject of Chad, which was a thorn in its side. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Deputy Assistant Secretary Donald Yamamoto met French Ambassador Jean-Pierre Bercot at breakfast for two hours April 25 at the Ambassador's Residence. Bercot was accompanied by his deputy, Francois Barateau, the Ambassador by DCM and poloff (notetaker).

U.S. Message to Deby

¶3. (C) DAS opened with a review of his meeting the previous day with President Idriss Deby Itno. He had delivered a message, first, requesting that Deby delay the May 3 election and, second, urging Deby to commence a constructive dialogue with the opposition with a view to creating democratic institutions in Chad. He said that he hoped the French would be able to give the same message. He had recently spoken with head of the Africa Division at the Quai, Bruno Joubert, who had agreed with this approach but at the same time said that it might not be effective. He would be seeing Joubert later in the week. Deby had refused on the first point, but had made what appeared to be a commitment on the second point, and DAS hoped that the United States and France could work together to hold Deby to that commitment. When the May 3 election took place, as Deby appeared to insist, the United States would have to say that that election was deeply flawed and that we were disappointed that the Chadian people were deprived of a fair election. We would also say that we expected Deby to abide by his commitment to engage in a constructive dialogue.

Bercot Recoils at Delay and Dialogue

¶4. (C) Bercot responded that it was too late to talk about delaying an election that was due to take place in eight days. He preferred to take a positive approach with Deby rather than threaten him. As he had suggested to the Ambassador the previous week (reftel) and as he had discussed with Joubert, Bercot's preferred approach was to press Deby to announce before May 3 an arrangement for sharing power with the opposition -- an opposition prime minister who would name his own cabinet and have full power to govern for a year until proper elections could be organized for the National Assembly. A call for political dialogue would lead nowhere useful. It would be a waste of precious time. The offer of genuine governing power to the opposition would immediately test its seriousness of purpose and immediately get the country on the road to serious reform, while political dialogue would only ensure bickering. As for the May 3 election, it was not likely to be "less correct" than most others in Africa.

Deby as Flawed but Necessary Geostrategic Partner

¶5. (C) Bercot regretted that the international community had played into the hands of a weak, divided, and ethnically-based opposition by appearing to support their boycott and giving them the illusion that it would oust Deby.

In fact, Deby had proved a reliable geostrategic partner. He had stood up to Libya and Sudan, welcomed the refugees, supported the idea of a UN force in Darfur, and stuck with Taiwan instead of opening his door to China. No doubt Deby had considerably lost ground in recent months, with desertions and a rebellion that had carried to the gates of

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Ndjamena. No doubt he had a terrible governance record and his state of health suggested he would not last out his next term. In fact, France had tried to get him to retire to Europe in 2003. Unfortunately, the Darfur crisis had erupted and changed France's calculations. It was essential that Deby open the door to better governance and greater liberty in Chad, but he was the least bad leader for Chad and the only one on the scene who could possibly be strong enough to face down Libya and Sudan.

France Reducing Presence

¶6. (C) Bercot said that, after the French troops stationed in Chad had been augmented by 150 coming up from Gabon at the time of the attack on Ndjamena, he had asked that those troops be sent back. Now he had also recommended that the remaining number of troops be cut in half. The French media had been very critical of French involvement in Chad, Chadians had been vitriolic, and it was necessary to stop giving the impression that the French troops were present to interfere in Chad's internal affairs. France's military relationship with Chad was not of the same order as with Senegal, Gabon, or Djibouti, but rather more like the short-term presence of French troops in Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Cote d'Ivoire. Handling security in Chad had become too great a responsibility for France, which had no economic interest in Chad, and if matters continued to deteriorate, French troops would be withdrawn altogether. It was high time for France to stop being the tool of the international community in Chad. Chad was no longer a French problem.

Ideas to Get One Side or the Other to Agree

¶7. (C) The Ambassador said that Bercot's idea of power-sharing was interesting, but it did not appear that either Deby or the opposition would agree to it. In DAS's discussion with opposition leaders the previous day, they had insisted that delay of the election was a nonnegotiable precondition. They had been willing to retain Deby as transitional president and had no problem with his running in a properly-organized election. Bercot painted a gloomy

picture of absence of reform during such transitional period, looting by the opposition of the treasury now full of oil money, and chaos that would present France with an intolerable security challenge. The Ambassador asked why not try both Bercot's idea of power-sharing and delaying the election. Bercot said Deby would certainly not buy in -- there could only be power-sharing if Deby got his election. The Ambassador suggested, then, that the only way to get the opposition to agree to power-sharing, if the present election were not delayed, would be to offer another presidential election at the same time as the National Assembly election -- i.e., Deby would be elected May 3 for only a year or two. Bercot said that such a proposal would also retard reform, as the opposition would all have their sights on running for president (each of them thinking he could be president) rather than on governing the country and instituting proper reforms. The result would be further radicalization of the opposition and further manipulation of the international community.

Agree on the Deeper Issue

¶18. (C) DAS said that the United States, like France and all external parties, was poised at a decision about how to help Chad, whether to engage more decisively or engage less and whether it was possible to coordinate effectively. The European Union was sending a delegation in a few days, the African Union had a delegation now in Ndamena. It was not clear how forceful either would be, given internal divisions. Whether France, the EU, and the AU were on board with the U.S. in its call to Deby for delaying the May 3 election, it was to be hoped that all could agree on the need for Deby to create democratic institutions that would promote long-term stability. Indeed, our call for delaying the elections was meant more to underline the deeper need to create institutions that would promote stability.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador observed that Deby would undoubtedly hold up his May 3 election as proof he was democratically elected. Bercot said that France would probably follow suit,

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commending the election publicly. DAS said that our message to Deby had made clear that we would see the May 3 election as flawed and would have to make a statement to that effect. However, Deby had responded positively to our request for a commitment to start working on democracy, and it was essential that France be on the same message on that point.

Thorn in the Side

¶10. (C) Bercot agreed it was necessary to have the same message otherwise Deby would play both sides against each other. But we needed to decide whether we really wanted reform or whether we preferred to attack Deby's legitimacy. We could all just decide to leave Chad, why not? In any case, Chad had become a serious thorn in France's side. In Paris (read, Chirac), there would be continued interest in Chad only through the end of the year, as there would be French elections next year, and Chad would interest "no one" in Paris in 2007. It was necessary to find a way to put Chad on an even keel quickly. He had put forward his idea of getting a new government in place that would test the opposition's seriousness of purpose on democratic reform, and he did not see any better ideas on the table.

¶11. (C) Bercot agreed that there was no doubt that Chad would change, probably for the worse. The gate to chaos was at hand and likely would open, yet with luck we might be able to guide it through nonviolent change. One essential element, in Bercot's view, was rapid installation of UN forces in Darfur, without which there would be no hope for stability in Chad. Deby had now overtly thrown his lot in with the Darfur rebels who would be more openly using the refugee camps for recruiting and using Chadian territory as a rear base, spelling greater Sudanese urgency to retaliate and

heightening the immediate need for blue-hatting. Bercot concluded that the days around the May 3 election would likely be hot, as the Sudanese had provided the Chadian rebels with 300 vehicles. No doubt, he said, "the worst is in front of us."

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